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# UNIT 1 SOME ASPECTS OF FICTION

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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As the word 'fiction' poses problems, the aim of this unit is to examine the relationship between fictional and realistic depictions. The novel can be seen as dealing with questions, issues as well as with the 'facts' of history. The eighteenth century is the century of prose as well as the rise of the novel, with both prose and the novel focusing on the common ways of life. The novel emerged as a new and significant mode of writing – becoming more than a means of providing entertainment, it became a means of radical questioning that would lead to a change in entrenched attitudes. The aim is to discuss these questions in the course of this Unit.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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This is the first Unit of the first Block in your course on the British Novel. As such, you will find that we discuss some basic issues here which will help you to understand not just *Tom Jones* but also the subsequent novels prescribed, so go through each section carefully and critically. Now that you are doing a Master's degree, you will need to read widely and variously. Try and find some of the books on the novel recommended at the end of the Block from your local library and try to read these alongside this Unit. It is not compulsory for you to read these books but reading them will certainly enhance your understanding of the novel as a literary form.

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## 1.2 THE NOVEL

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### 1.2.1 The Novel as Fiction (?)

As against imaginative or fictional, **the novel is a realistic form**. It presents that segment of life and society, in more or less approximate terms, which has been seen and experienced by actual men and women of a particular period. The concept of mirroring or reflecting an object is more significant in the case of the novel than it would be in the case of poetry or drama. There is indeed the assumption that a social situation with its problems and issues is faithfully recorded in the novel and that the reader does not come across any major flights of imagination on the part of the writer. Also, in the novel, there are no concentrated descriptions that point towards the dark recesses of the mind, the mysteries of the soul, as it were. At the time of writing, the novelist seems to have definitively concluded that his men and women are of the day-to-day kind, working,

chatting, moving around, without the high furnishings of the soul, psyche or mind. They seldom poeticise or see themselves in the heroic mould. While pursuing their ordinary goals of securing bread and butter which entails most of their waking hours, the peasants, craftsmen and traders of a specific social world are part of mundane situations. The job of the novelist is to see how these people conduct themselves, enmeshed as they are in their specific surroundings.

While reading a novel, we may feel that we have been transported to a different world with its own laws, rules and regulations. Towns and villages, markets, streets and pathways hold out as *actual* places with their distinct colouring and feel. **Yes, the emphasis is on actuality.** Not only are the people shown as speaking with their very own mannerisms, but ordinary information about their appearance, condition, opinions and states of mind also is imparted by the author in his or her own voice. This second aspect of the writer's practice implies that the describing person, the novelist, has an opinion and a point of view according to which she/he judges without much scruple the actions of the different characters selected, consciously and with an ostensible purpose, for presentation. The judgement of the writer is biased as all judgements are. The biases obviously indicate that the writer is totally immersed in the overall fate of the characters as well as the effect of their behaviour on the life and nature of the society. In this sense, the writer can be seen as a responsible member of the actual society of that time as well as the society reflected in the novel.

The remarks of the author meant clearly for sharing with the reader, lend authenticity to the description in the novel and make the reader accept it as a truthful account. This leads to a state in which the reader is strongly drawn into the ethos of the world of the novel. In the course of reading a novel, therefore, the reader may feel that he or she is witness to an actual happening in which real people have been involved. The words in the text do not merely signify something outside of or away from them. Instead, the words are there on the page as a picture or pictures which introduce the reader to their world and bind him or her to its specific aspects. There is no wonder that the reader of the novel would get fully absorbed in the goings on of the world chosen for representation in the work. This is what I mean by the novel as a realistic form.

'Imaginative' on the other hand denotes an unreal thing, a 'creation' of the mind of a person gifted with an unusually inventive and powerful imagination. It is also suggested that words in a text under the imaginative category have to be taken as tools and that the artist works with their help to fulfil his/her specific artistic, moral or spiritual purpose. This purpose may be to produce a literary work of exceptional symbolic spiritual significance.

What is fictional then? The word "invented" or "invention" is yet more meaningful in this case. It denotes that the account presented in a work bears no relation with the reality of life as we know it — it is imaginative and more, it is 'fictional.' In this sense, fictional would be more appropriate a term for poetry.

Isn't fiction a "non-fact," a lie? Most of us wish to leave the existing world of hard routine and drudgery so that we move to another in which we can do what we like, where "wishes would be horses." We also notice that the maker of the lie, a liar, is an interesting person as against one who preaches high morality. Have we watched the behaviour of a liar closely? If we have, we would mark that a liar, a compulsive liar, is one who is mentally alert, and all the time notes changes in the faces of the listeners, who keeps track of their moods, and constantly struggles to find out what his or her audience wishes to hear. The liar accordingly modifies the lie as it is in progress. This is because the fact that the liar is highly inventive and imaginative. But there is a difference. While poetry and drama are also invented and imagined, they cannot be equated with a

lie. On the other hand, they are "high truths." Is it not because of this 'lie' aspect that the novel has been associated with fiction? While poetry and drama talk about the Truth, the universal all-embracing wisdom, the novel as a fictional piece may rest content with presenting an ordinary life-situation. In this way, the irony behind the 'fictional piece' cannot be missed. Or can it?

### 1.2.2 Fiction as History

Fiction or fictional has come to acquire such strong affinities with the novel that we use the two synonymously. Walter Allen in his book *The English Novel* has drawn our attention in this regard to the issue of artistic representation—the way a writer gives shape to an experience in her/his work. Characters in a novel symbolise specific attitudes in a given society and the writer conveys through them those significant impressions which she or he has gathered from the surroundings. Characters and social impressions merge into each other and the end-product strongly binds us to the represented action. But the writer does not merely 'gather' impressions from life. What happens is that impressions precede characters and are in fact moulded and re-made into characters by the author. In this sense, they are truly fictional — moulding and remaking imply that the author's imagination has been at work in an intense manner. There is also the problem of a plausible, life-like situation that the writer is supposed to invent. This means that characters in the novel cannot be constructed and rendered flesh and blood unless they are placed in identifiable circumstances of our own world. The men and women in a work of fiction become our links with the period in which the writer has lived and stand for those actual trends that existed at the time. Through Allworthy, Western, Jones and Blifil in *Tom Jones*, for instance, we gain close familiarity with the developments in eighteenth century England. The process is complex but the truth is quite simple. In a peculiar way, the actual circumstance, the society of a period becomes a necessary component of fiction. Fiction becomes significant history. That is how the line between the imaginative and the real gets blurred and history intrudes inevitably into fiction. In Walter Allen's words:

"Perhaps character was never anything more than a literary exercise, but its relation to novel is obvious. The first magnificent fruit of its marriage with reality, however, is seen in works of history, especially in the great portrait gallery of Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*. This was inevitable. Before the novel, which must to a greater or less degree be an imitation of the actual world, could be born, there had to be works already in existence which were not imitations, that is not fiction, but faithful descriptions of the actual world. So, among the strongest influences on what was becoming the novel were works of history like Clarendon's and soberly careful accounts of real life adventure, distant countries, and strange peoples like Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World*" (p.31).

The question posed here is whether fiction comes to gradually resemble history, or to put in another way, history becomes the all-important subject of fiction. We can take the argument onto another plane and say that around the eighteenth century in England, history becomes a matter of vital interest for the common writer who sets out to do justice to it by focusing upon the behaviour and problems of ordinary men and women.

However, the novel is different from history in one important respect. History as we see it is a long continuous process without a clear tangible beginning as well as an end — it goes on unfolding itself beyond its specific actors of a period, its men and women who are active within it to influence and change it. On the other hand, the novel *begins* at a particular point of life in society as well as ends at another point. Those two points in the novel, recognised and chosen by the author are extremely significant, because between

them lies that segment of social life — captured as it has been through words — which vibrates with meaning at every turn and also contains within itself a totality and a certain truth. It is a significant difference between history, the life of actual people at a given time, and a literary work. In the examination, students are generally asked to comment on the ending of a novel and tell the truth that has been constructed with its help. Why? Because it is assumed, and rightly perhaps, that the end matters in terms of the *lesson* which the novelist set out to convey to the reader. Replace the word “lesson” with the word “moral” and what we have is a fable which has to establish a useful aspect of human wisdom relevant to the period in which the writer lived. The reader gains this wisdom by virtue of arduously following the course of events depicted in the novel and sees that the author consciously took him on a specific journey in imagination. The same thing can be perceived in an account of history but with less emphasis since the historian is much more answerable to the actuality of events, the socio-historical reality of the period under study. In history, moral lessons can be noticed as merely-scattered, and the person, the historian, if he chose to clearly underline these morals, can be accused of violating laws of objectivity. He may face the accusation of allowing subjective biases to play the decisive role in the presentation of the historical account. Yes, there are lessons in history, but they are the tentative creations (of course, no useful study of history is possible without them) of the perceiver or the interpreter, not of history as such. For instance, a specific ‘understanding’ of history can be countered by ‘another’ understanding. You can see contrasting lessons conveyed by another interpreter of the same period in history. This is because history is no single person’s or group’s creation — in fact, being a bigger continuum, it is not the creation of any person, group or, even, the whole society of the specific period. Simply taken, it is found there when we are born and it would, hopefully, be there when we die. In contrast, the novel is an author’s creation — it *entirely* belongs to him or her. If the individual so wished, the writing of the novel could be indefinitely deferred or the idea altogether discarded. Such is the grip and bind of the author on the novel, on its writing. Starting from the idea of the fictional piece, the author gives it slant and direction. One can go to the extent of saying that the author has a large number of alternative strategies to choose from. This means that the shaping of the novel involves a great deal of flexibility.

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## 1.3 THE EVOLUTION OF THE NOVEL

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### 1.3.1 Some Problems

It is useful to go into the history or genesis of the novel in England. There are a large number of books on the subject that provide good information about prose works in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The idea in these books is that the prose works of the earlier period can be clearly linked up with the novel in the eighteenth century. The common point between the two seems to be prose. Then, there are the stories of discovery, exploration and adventure, which also have laid claims to parenting this modern literary form. It is suggested that the spirit of curiosity necessitated a loose fictional form which provided enough scope to the writer to collect information as well as to question, analyse and assess the new material. These stories centred around ‘the wandering rogue,’ a rootless, un-tied persona whose fascination for new and unknown places could hold immense appeal for the reader. Add to them the imaginary, totally ‘fictional’ pieces written by their authors in different countries of Europe to entertain the reader, taking him or her on an imaginary voyage to the world of mystery, wonder and magic. In these, nothing ‘real’ was intended for projection, their fundamental motive being to give pleasure. Curiosity, suspense and story-telling were supposed to bring these writings closer to the novel. In this context, all one can say is that important as these imaginative efforts are in their respective languages and periods, they scarcely enlighten us about the emergence of the novel. All that has come in the wake of such a venture is

mere guesswork. In fact, the fault in such a genesis-tracing exercise is that it is based on the erroneous concept of literary history. The term 'literary history' denotes that there is a direct linkage within literature between works written in the past with those written later, and that, in a manner of saying, literature produces out of itself. There is also a tendency among scholars of literature these days of going to the philosophical writings of the period in which specific literary works were composed. This is done with a view to explaining how a particular writer's sensibility was moulded by those philosophical writings and trends. The suggestion is that apart from the literary works already existing, it is the philosophical tendencies which produce new literature. Under this scheme, the author is merely seen as moulding the available literary material to suit his/her cultural requirements and of extending the literary horizon a bit further. This assumption should be carefully gone into and examined. Literary history, or even history of literature for that matter, is a concept that requires careful handling by the student of literature. I am not saying that there cannot be a history of the novel theoretically speaking, but that it cannot be seen as independent of that larger history with its specific struggles to break free from existing shackles. It is really disappointing to see that reference to actual events, particularly the economic and political ones, is missing in discussions about the emergence of the novel.

### 1.3.2 Shift to Prose in the Eighteenth Century

Prose had seldom been a medium of serious creative endeavour before the eighteenth century. Barring a few exceptions, writers of the past chose verse — longer poems, poetic drama, short poems of definite or indefinite length — to share their views, experience or vision with the audience. That is how it had to be, since the audience consisted of the selected few. Till the middle of the seventeenth century, poems could also be found circulating among the narrow circle of friends and fellow writers because they alone were presumed to appreciate imaginative work. The idea of the mass of readers who could be approached through the printed word emerged only in the eighteenth century. Why? Did something peculiar happen in the later period?

The prose-work in the eighteenth century came to locate some new issues in society and handled them with a seriousness hitherto unnoticed. As said above, one of these issues was marriage. It was more than a subject of debate through the presentation of which the writer was able to critique a particular relationship. Earlier, the act of marriage reminded us of the considerations of social propriety, class distinction and religion — it was truly *social*. For instance, the Restoration marriage, the marriage encountered in the comic plays of the Restoration period, was between those men and women who came largely from the upper stratum. The would-be partners in marriage talked with some self-consciousness (they thought of choice, need and purpose) and finally joined each other in a traditionally accepted matrimonial schedule — their background and social upbringing seldom allowing them to rethink or breach the social code of the male-dominated family. This family was a well-established institution essentially reflecting the nature of the older social structure. Writers could not invest much thought in an issue which remained largely impersonal or, if the partners in marriage were bold and courageous, narrowly personal. This second could be seen only around the seventies of the previous century under the impact of recent upheavals or changes. But matrimony could not be considered a significant point of living, confined as women were to the home. The higher plane of social existence associated itself with such vital principles as honour, privilege, acquisition of money, etc. However, things changed radically in the first quarter of the eighteenth century compelling people to consider marriage as a whole set of new considerations — morality, ethics, love, courage, commitment. And what stood in focus was not merely the middle class man, conscious, alert and honest, but the woman, the new woman who was becoming aware of her place in society, who saw that new horizons of fulfilment and

liberty had opened in the wake of the socio-political churning England had gone through a few decades before. The epithet 'middle class' is not to belittle or denigrate the worth of these people on whom it had fallen, to fearlessly as well as intelligently, confront the mighty world of privilege. They were the common people of England who had moved upfront by dint of hard labour and industry and who not only asserted their right to equality but also influenced the policy-making of the nation. They led the lower masses in thought and attitude and effectively resisted the ways of old tradition. Their kind of sharp rational questioning, self-assurance and vigour found a true medium in prose. The common people of England, particularly the middle classes, wanted to know and understand. They enjoyed talking. For them, dialogue was more important than statement since it provided to them an opportunity to question and disagree. They also aspired to theorise and philosophise and evolve through this a new way of responding to the environment. They took pleasure in cracking jokes and playing with language. Far from being complacent about popular norms, they happily shocked their friends and critics alike. All this required larger accounts and representations. Fielding particularly exemplifies this activated mass of people in England and he lets them talk in their natural style which is prose, the medium through which life in the market, the street, on the road, at the inn, conducted itself.

### 1.3.3 The Novel as a New Literary Form

We have to think about the factors which inspire a writer to choose a particular form from those already existing or, as happened in the eighteenth century, evolve a new one so that it served as an appropriate vehicle for his purpose. The process of the evolution of a form is highly complex because one can see in it a concrete dialectical interaction between a writer's urge to communicate and an environment which on its part is hardly passive, which persists in its threatening posture with the existing modes of expression. I particularly want to stress the presence of women, a whole lot of them, in the eighteenth century society who had the leisure to relax at home with a book or periodical in hand as well as the inclination to know how to dress, walk and converse but also to contemplate upon the questions of right and wrong in life. They were no ordinary women. They were the wives of those men who had become more productive than members of any other social group in the economic field, who organised manufacture from procurement of raw material and employment of artisans to work with it to making available space for collective activity and looking after the deployment of correct methods that the artisans would use to turn out finished goods. More than this, they arranged money for all this activity which saw them through in the final activity of selling the goods in the market so that profits came flowing in. It appears to be a simple activity of the economic kind on the surface but is actually a highly challenging and problematic social activity affecting life-conditions as a whole. This is because in the course of this endeavour, the involved men who were also creating a new value pattern, a novel way of making sense about tendencies that were thrown up in the life in the market. Still more, the market as a new powerful centre of activity spread out to cover all vital areas of existence including ideology and spirituality.

Some significant developments could be seen in the early eighteenth century in England on the literary-cultural plane. One of these was the rise of the periodical — a magazine or pamphlet which sought to engage the average person in useful conversation. This average person was the middle class city-dweller, the gentleman proper or the gentleman in the making who had an interest in the daily occurrences of life, who did not want to merely put two and two together but to also develop a no-nonsense pragmatic understanding to guide him. Such needs were earlier fulfilled in the case of the lower masses by the village parson who interpreted the age-old principles of life and behaviour for the benefit of the common person. However, the difference between the need of the new middle class city-

dweller we have in mind and the common person with whom the parson communicated lay in their social positioning — the former also asking for pleasure while receiving moral guidance. Naturally enough, this new gentleman-in-the-making looked elsewhere for this service in the direction of a non-religious, secular agency. Hence the fulfilment of the need by the periodical — an instrument which did away with the compulsion of going to a specific place at an appointed hour and instead provided the service at one's doorstep. Of course, for availing oneself of the service, one had to meet the precondition of literacy. This the particular individual could well afford in the given social conditions. In its infancy, the novel incorporated some of the functions and traits of the periodical.

#### 1.3.4 The Novel as Comedy

Comedy in the eighteenth century differed immensely from that in the seventeenth century. It became lighter in vein and dealt with those issues which could be easily resolved. Take the case of social manners under whose overall perspective questions such as marriage and love were considered by the writers. The relationship of love became extremely important in social discourse in which great emphasis was laid on individual choice. The man and the woman together took the decision to marry and thus set at nought the pressures of family and society. As a consequence of this emphasis in the eighteenth century on decision-making by the individual, norms and principles of orthodoxy came under severe criticism. One of the reasons why an ordinary person became associated with heroic qualities such as courage and fearlessness was that an important segment of society, the middle class to be precise, stood to gain from protest and rebellion since that weakened the hold of the privileged sections on social behaviour. Under this logic, marriage became a means for the middle class to question the values and norms espoused by entrenched interests. The focus on social manners takes us away from the serious questions of work, shelter and upkeep to be provided by a society to its members. Only those who have solved the problems of bread and butter think of evolving a code of behaviour. The issues of virtue, goodness, morality and kindness which fall under the category of ethics and manners are of great interest to the progressive upcoming sections. Further, the discussion of manners suggests that the members of this group have become individually capable of improving their behaviour, that they have merely to take a close look at their norms and principles in order to adopt a strategy to execute progress and improvement. In this sense, the improvement in manners is primarily a question of active choice. The individual in such circumstances is expected to examine the nature of his/her social environment so that s/he can then take guidance from the rules that govern it. That the environment can be inimical and become an insurmountable obstruction is something that is beyond the imagination of this highly active and conscious entity.

Under the perspective of manners as we understand them, can we adequately define love and marriage? Well, love in such a case would be a relationship between two persons who are relatively free from social constraints. Society can certainly cause problems to them but it would not prove more than a mere inconvenience. On the other hand, love for the man and the woman involved would be a challenge they have to meet in order to fulfil their wish — love offers them scope to draw upon their inner resources and assert, in the process of meeting it, their selfhood.

Needless to say that from such a love, the journey to marriage is a more or less smooth affair. The union between the young people, even when they are socially unequal — one of them from a poor background and the other belonging to the upper social stratum — can cause raising of eyebrows and some clever scheming by a few to thwart it. But the criticism from orthodox quarters may at the same time inspire some other mem'ers in

society to stand in support of the lovers. This clash ending in merely the ruffling of a few feathers, therefore, does not lead to dangerous hostility and violence as it did in the past.

Were love and marriage challenges in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for the individuals who were involved in the relationship? The answer is obviously no. Neither love nor marriage could be separated from the social structure of the time. It was a bond that decisively affected the elite in their pursuit of power, prestige and honour. Both were "social" and "political" events — they made statements about the families, the dynasties and the important streams of traditional behaviour to which the specific persons belonged and which came into play when certain individuals decided to take the "law" in their own hands

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#### 1.4 LET US SUM UP

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One of the points on which the middle classes of the eighteenth century were exercised was transition. The question these sections confronted was : How to interpret the change that was taking place around them in the world of manners and attitudes consequent upon the economic power they had come to acquire. There is no doubt that change was desirable. But could it be pursued with vigour which is possible only when one is sure about the positive outcome? Obviously, history could not be rolled back as the entrenched interests of the landed gentry wished and whom the village parson in his religious wisdom tended to serve. We come across innumerable arguments against and in support of change in the books written in the eighteenth century in which 'modern' was a much criticised word. At the same time, we notice a definite shrillness in the words of those who opposed change. Perhaps, they were fighting a losing battle: On the other hand, change in itself did not denote anything specific and tangible. Because of this, one could clearly discern a vacuum in the 'spiritual' territory. It so happened that the writer stepped forward to fill this vacuum through the mould of 'conversation in prose.'